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ABSTRACT

A pilot program of foreign language instruction in Scottish elementary schools is evaluated. The program consisted of 12 projects in 76 elementary schools, articulated with their 12 associated secondary schools. French was taught in six projects, Spanish in four, and German and Italian in one each. Regular classroom teachers were trained and given support by a tutor-trainer. Evaluation of the projects focused on the language attainments of the participating children, especially in comparison with non-participants, and factors in the courses and methods that enhanced or inhibited language learning. Data were gathered by classroom observation, interviews with participating students, and interviews with teachers, trainers, regional supervisors. Findings include the following: Project participants performed better, especially at lower skill levels, at pronunciation and intonation, ability to initiate and respond in conversation, and use of more phrases and sentences than did non-participants. Grammatical accuracy was not better in this group. Some differences were found between target languages. Participants were found to be, overall, more confident in language use. Implications of the findings for regular elementary school teachers, secondary school modern language teachers, teacher collaboration, policy formation, teacher educators, and parents are outlined. (MSE)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
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# INTERCHANGE

No 19

## *Foreign Languages in Primary Schools: the National Pilot Projects in Scotland*

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# Foreign Languages in Primary Schools: the National Pilot Projects in Scotland

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*British people have long been seen as reluctant to learn foreign languages as compared with others in Europe. If school leavers from the UK are to compete for jobs in Europe, there is a need for action at school level to raise competence in foreign languages. One approach is to introduce a foreign language at the primary school stage, increasing the overall time spent on learning the language and taking advantage of children's receptiveness at an earlier age. In Scotland, a national pilot initiative in primary foreign languages was begun by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) in 1989. The independent evaluation of the pilot projects, funded by SOED and conducted by a research team from the University of Stirling, began in January 1991. This report covers the first two years of the evaluation. The research is now in an extension phase, lasting until autumn 1994.*

*The main aim of the SOED pilot was the development of competence in the foreign language by the primary pupils.*

What are the advantages and disadvantages of focusing on linguistic competence for foreign language beginners at this younger age?

## Background

### *Aims of the primary school foreign language projects*

The main aim of the pilot projects was stated by SOED as the development of competence in a foreign language by the primary school pupils taking part. Children's motivation and confidence were also regarded as important goals. There was less emphasis on cultural awareness or general knowledge about language, although these were regarded as possible extra benefits.

### *Features of the projects*

Twelve pilot projects, each comprising a secondary school and its associated primaries, were set up, six in 1989 and six in 1990 (12 secondary and 76 primary schools in all.) French was taught in six, German in four and one each for Spanish and Italian. The scheme began with P7 classes (age 10 or 11), so that the issues of continuity and

*Support for teaching foreign languages in primary schools can take a variety of forms.*

How can the primary teacher best be supported in offering foreign language teaching ?

progression could be addressed within the time scale of the pilot as pupils moved from primary to secondary. In the first two years SOED funded one full-time extra member of staff per project. In all but one, the extra member of staff was appointed to the modern language department of the pilot secondary school to teach in both primary and secondary classes. This arrangement allowed several members of the modern language departments to act as visiting teachers in the primary schools and gain experience which would help ease the transition for pupils. In the remaining project, the region appointed a tutor-trainer who was primary trained with an appropriate foreign language background. The tutor-trainer was to act as a support to primary class teachers to enable them to take on increasing responsibility for teaching the foreign language. Both staffing models required the active involvement and participation of the primary class teachers for success and many of these teachers took a lead in integrating the foreign language into the primary curriculum, a development which has become a hallmark of the national pilot.

One feature of the pilot was the large number of composite classes within the primary schools; children as young as seven or eight were involved in learning a foreign language. In September 1991 and 1992, in response to this situation and to the widespread perceived success of the initiative, SOED expanded the pilot into P6 (ages nine and 10). Two of the first-phase projects expanded provision down to P4 and to ages seven and eight. SOED differentiated its provision of extra staff to take into account the varying number of classes and primary schools involved in each project. Each region continued with its policy of appointing either secondary-trained visiting teachers or tutor-trainers, most of whom were primary trained.

## The evaluation research

### *Aims*

The two specified aims for the research were:

- to assess the language attainments of children involved in pilot projects, including comparison with children not involved;
- to evaluate courses and methods, and comment on factors which enhanced or inhibited language performance of the children involved.

Both aims emphasise the importance of attainment/performance in the language, but do not directly mention aspects such as pupils' attitude, motivation or cultural awareness.

### *Research methods*

The research investigation used the following techniques:

- Classroom observations of foreign language lessons, comprising informal observations of P7 and S1 classes during initial visits; video recordings of 20 S1/S2 lessons; formal observation of 29 lessons from

P4 to S2, using a systematic observation schedule. These lessons were then coded and analysed by the research team.

- Assessments of pupils' foreign language ability (competence), comprising simple conversations in the foreign language between a researcher and pairs of pupils in P7, S1 and S2. These conversations revolved round topics which had already been covered in class and allowed children to focus on their own interests. The research team took account of the topics and language functions contained in the SOED Guidelines, *National Pilot Modern Languages in the Primary School: Guidelines for Teachers* (November 1990 and January 1992) describing good practice in the project schools. During the conversation, researchers gave extensive answers to the pupils' questions. This increased the role of listening comprehension in the interactive process. In addition, the assessment comprised teacher-led group tasks, involving listening, in some instances to quite demanding foreign language talk, and speaking. These procedures were piloted in the schools and were considered appropriate by the teachers concerned. The schools' internal assessments in S1/S2 in reading and writing were also made available to the research team.
- Interviews with those involved with the projects: secondary modern languages teachers, tutor-trainers, primary class teachers, headteachers, regional advisers and directorate staff, members of the national steering committee (including HM Inspectorate, development officers) and teachers of 16 observation classes.

The question 'do children who experience foreign languages in the primary school perform better than those who begin at S1?' was a difficult one to answer in this research for a number of reasons:

- There was no question of manipulating schools and children into an 'experimental' situation.
- The pilot project secondary schools, as selected by SOED, did not constitute a 'representative sample' in Scotland; on the contrary, they were selected from schools seen as particularly forward-looking.
- The researchers considered that a valid analysis of attainment could only be made within each language; as a consequence, numbers in any one language at each stage were too small to be a basis for generalisation. Overall findings in different languages could, however, be compared.
- Valid comparisons between 'project' pupils (who had experienced the foreign language at primary school) and 'non-project' or S1 beginners could only be made within the project schools.
- Even within the projects, the research did not have the resources to investigate every class in every project school.

For these reasons, the researchers are cautious about generalising from the research findings.

## Findings on learning and teaching

*Whole class teaching was the predominant form of class organisation in the lessons observed.*

Should whole class teaching be the main approach?

Classroom observations showed that teachers (mainly visiting teachers) in the primary schools conducted lessons very largely in the foreign language. Two thirds of the foreign language used by teachers was 'real' rather than 'practice': that is, the emphasis was on communicating meaning, not on rehearsing a form of words. Whole class teaching was the predominant form of class organisation in the 29 lessons observed.

The pupil activity most frequently observed by the researchers was listening, especially to phrases and short sentences. 'Doing' was the next most common behaviour observed. This could be responding to the foreign language by a physical action or other non-verbal response such as drawing. Speaking, reading or writing the foreign language was only a small part of the activity. High levels of pupil involvement and participation were noted.

Tasks such as story telling with pupil participation were used with pupils in the pilot projects both in primary classes and in S1. Apparently playful activities often had the underlying aim of teaching about idiom and grammar. In primary classes, treatment of these areas was likely to be implicit rather than explicit. Some topic areas were revisited at both primary and secondary stages, though most topics in secondary classes were those commonly found in modern languages courses. In the primary school, topics related to children's interests and outlook and their day-to-day school experience, for example, collecting dinner money and other social interactions between teacher and class, were often carried out in the foreign language. Primary teachers were very committed to the pilot and wanted their pupils to continue the foreign language they had started into S1.

*Primary teachers wanted pupils to continue their primary foreign language into S1*

What are the advantages and disadvantages for a) pupils and b) schools of such a continuation?
Can a switch of foreign language in S1 be justified?

## Findings on pupils' language attainment

In 1990–91, a sample of S1 and S2 pupils were selected for interview. These comprised (a) project pupils in S1 who had had two years of the foreign language, one in P7 and one in S1; (b) non-project pupils in S1 who had one year of the language and (c) non-project pupils in S2 who had had two years of the language. Comparisons were made with respect to linguistic attainment across these three groups. There was evidence that project pupils had an advantage in pronunciation and intonation, the ability to initiate and respond in conversation, and the use of more phrases and sentences rather than single words. There was no evidence of an increase in grammatical accuracy. These gains were evident at all three levels of ability in the pupil sample, but were particularly marked among those of middle and lower ability.

In 1992, a more detailed analysis was used to look more fully at how project pupils used the foreign language in the researcher/pupil conversations. P7 pupils were included in these assessments,

as the 1991 pupil assessments were not designed to show how much the children had acquired by the end of primary school. The 1992 findings indicated that at P7, S1 and S2 pairs of pupils at all levels of ability could participate in a simple conversation (lasting approximately 20 minutes) with an unknown adult with little resort to English. As well as answering questions about themselves and their interests, they were able to ask the researcher questions about herself and show understanding of extended answers.

Progress from P7 through S1 to S2 in terms of pupils using more and longer utterances, more nouns, verbs, modifiers, pronouns and connectors, and a greater range of vocabulary, was more clearly apparent in German than in French. (In order to maintain anonymity, Spanish and Italian findings, each based on one project alone, were reported separately). There was evidence of progress for pupils rated by their teachers as high, medium and low attainers. Girls showed some advantage over boys.

The evidence from the interviews with pupils was supported by teachers' views in interviews, the researchers' classroom observations and the assessments supplied by the schools. In secondary schools, teachers mentioned that pupils from the projects were noticeably more confident in oral work, were willing to 'have a go' and speak in the language, and that classes could cope with extended use of the foreign language by the teacher. They also commented that project pupils were much more confident in handling numbers and the alphabet in the foreign language than secondary school beginners. These impressions were substantiated by the data from the classroom observation study. Secondary teachers attributed the ease with which pupils of all abilities coped with numbers in the foreign language to the fact that they had been exposed to many routine classroom activities involving numbers in that language. Furthermore, teachers felt that these benefits were not lost as pupils progressed through secondary school.

*Primary teachers are accustomed to the interaction of all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. They were more likely to favour using the same approach with the foreign language, rather than postponing the written word.*

When should reading and writing in the foreign language be introduced ?

Another element of assessment was the teacher-led group tasks, also involving listening and speaking, set up in negotiation with researchers. In the secondary classes these tasks showed evidence of influence from the primary projects. However, in the types of task set within the more formal assessments in S1 and S2, there was less evidence of influence from the primary school projects. Findings about the younger pupils in the projects were more impressionistic, but it was clear that pupils down to P4 could take part enthusiastically in foreign language games, songs and story-telling. A 'listen and do' approach was widely used for the beginners in the primary school, moving to increased encouragement to speak, together with exposure to the written word. Pupils at both P4 and P7 were aware of a wide variety of strategies for learning and using a foreign language. The introduction of writing in the foreign language, on the other hand, was a question upon which primary and secondary teachers often held differing views.

## Implications of the findings for different groups

In January 1993 the Scottish Office announced that a modern European language would be offered in all Scottish primary schools, with primary teachers themselves taking on responsibility for the foreign language teaching. An implementation strategy is being devised, with a training programme for primary teachers beginning in the school year 1993–94. Although the new scheme will not be based around secondary visiting teachers or tutors, experience of the pilot project and the findings of the evaluation have provided important information for the new programme. The implications of the research findings for different groups must therefore be considered in the light of future plans.

### *Primary teachers*

*Primary teachers devised their own ways of finding time for the foreign language.*

What does it mean to integrate a foreign language into the primary curriculum ?

- Teachers in pilot primary schools who were beginners in the language were able to play an active part alongside a visiting teacher or tutor. They reinforced the visiting teacher's lessons by means of a 'daily dose' of the foreign language: weather charts, dinner numbers, music, craft and physical education or mental arithmetic. Visiting teachers found this input very valuable.
- In the project using the tutor-trainer method, some primary teachers undertook the teaching on their own, but they could call upon foreign language expertise when it was needed, and use materials from the tutor trainer team.
- At the time of the interviews, primary advisers expressed more confidence than did modern language advisers that a worthwhile start in foreign languages could be made without using secondary visiting teachers.

### *Modern language teachers in secondary schools*

*The activities that primary children engage in through the medium of the foreign language largely reflect their interests and needs and are not determined by the structure of a course book.*

How should S1 and S2 courses be adapted to suit pupils who have been learning a foreign language at primary school ?

- Modern languages teachers who have worked in the pilot primary schools have gained valuable insights into primary teaching methodology and into the linguistic attainments of children in P7. This experience can help teachers adapt their teaching styles and S1 course materials to ensure that pupils benefit fully from their early start in the foreign language. However, the research team concluded that this is an area in which further progress will be essential. Development time will have to be set aside to enable teachers to meet this challenge.
- The activities that primary children engage in through the medium of the foreign language largely reflect their interests and needs and are not determined by the structure of a course book. Teachers tended to see this as the key to maintaining children's motivation. Any adaptation of secondary school courses will need to ensure that the modern languages curriculum continues to reflect the pupils' interests if their motivation is to be maintained.

### *Headteachers*

- Improved liaison between primary and secondary schools has been seen in many places as a benefit from the primary pilot projects, especially in terms of collaboration between teachers from both sectors about what and how to teach. This will be more difficult to achieve if in the future visiting teachers with appropriate expertise are to assume a less prominent role. The 5–14 programme requires primary/secondary collaboration across the curriculum and it will be important to foster liaison in the future.

*The 5-14 programme requires primary–secondary collaboration across the curriculum*

**What developments in primary–secondary liaison are needed in order to maximise the gains of foreign languages in the primary school ?**

- Wider implementation of foreign languages in the primary school will impose substantial demands for professional development. In addition to language training courses for primary teachers, both primary and secondary teachers will need time for curriculum development. Primary teachers have to plan to embed the new language in the curriculum; secondary teachers have to adapt courses and methods to maintain continuity and momentum.
- Local steering committees in the projects have been beneficial in linking not only the primary school with its associated secondary, but in forging links among the primary schools themselves.

### *Policy makers and managers at regional and national level*

- It is vital that the principle of school clusters be maintained. If primary schools were added to the programme on an 'opt-in' basis, it would be more difficult to develop continuity and progression.
- The language attainments reported in the research have generally been achieved on the basis of primary teachers working in direct collaboration with visiting teachers or tutors. The primary teachers contributed expertise in the primary curriculum and in teaching younger learners; the secondary teachers brought not only language skills but also their expertise in foreign language teaching. Many of the activities undertaken in the pilot projects by two teachers working together in the classroom would be less feasible for a teacher working alone. In the post-pilot context, the foreign language competence of the primary teacher will become a key issue. If the gains of the pilot project are to be generalised across the country, it will be necessary for primary class teachers to show confidence, spontaneity, fluency, accuracy and range in their use of the foreign language.

*Some regional inservice training in the pilots focused on language teaching methods and activities, and some on extending command of the language.*

**What would be a desirable balance between these and other important aspects?**

- Continuing support for teachers and schools will be required, once the primary school teachers have completed their initial inservice training programmes. In particular, it will be essential that they should retain contact with teachers from the associated secondary, and with native speakers of the foreign language, and have opportunities for continuing contact with the cultures that the foreign language represents.

*8000 primary teachers in Scotland have a modern language to SCE Higher, but most of these are in French.*

In how many languages should pre-service training be offered?

***Teacher educators***

- As the primary foreign-language policy proceeds, serious consideration will have to be given to the role of foreign languages in initial primary teacher education.
- Entrants to initial teacher education courses are more likely to have school passes in French than in other languages. Unless sustained efforts are made to provide courses in Italian, Spanish and even German, the dominance of French will be perpetuated.

***Parents***

- Interviewees reported that the great majority of parents were eager to see the inclusion of foreign languages in the primary curriculum. Parents may need to be made aware of the dangers of exerting pressure for too speedy implementation across the country.
- The evidence from these pilot projects is that primary foreign language learning is appropriate for and 'stretches' children of all abilities, not only the most able. The research also found widespread evidence that pilot pupils found the experience rewarding.
- Schools should explain to parents the benefits of learning a foreign language, whether or not this is French. It will also be helpful to parents if the aims and methods of language learning in primary schools are clearly set out.

## Conclusion

All those involved in the pilot projects in Scotland have found them to be a very demanding but worthwhile development. The outstanding commitment of many teachers has been noted by headteachers, advisers and HM Inspectors of Schools. In view of the expense of running the pilot scheme with visiting teachers or tutors and the shortage of secondary-trained modern language teachers, it is not surprising that the wider implementation of the programme will be based on a different approach.

The research showed that both staffing models in the national pilot projects, one of which did not directly involve secondary teachers, were effective. It was the commitment of all the teachers and tutors involved, and the quality of the support they received, that were the key factors in determining the success of the scheme. The research team believes that this will continue to be the case with the new staffing model.

## Full report of the research

For further details of the research contact:
Scottish CILT, Pathfoot Building, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

**Linguistic competence and younger pupils**

**Support for primary teachers**

**Whole class teaching**

**Continuation into S1**

**Introduction of reading and writing**

**Integration into the primary curriculum**

**Adapting courses and methods in S1 and S2**

**Primary–secondary school liaison**

**Focus of regional inservice**

**Pre-service training in languages other than French**

## *Notes*

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